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Rising Out of the Gap: Early Adolescent Black Males and Academic Success

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Abstract

This qualitative inquiry examined the lived experiences of 14 high-achieving, eighth-grade, Black males in three inner city middle schools. Anchored in a social constructivist paradigm, this study focused on factors that influence the educational experiences of early adolescent Black males. Participant selection was based on state test scores, GPA, and SES; data were collected by classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Six themes and twenty-two subthemes related to factors which promote achievement and the meaning of achievement were found. Results show that high achieving students were motivated to excel, in part, by striving to counter negative assumptions about Black males. Participants faced many personal and contextual challenges, but they were able to identify individual and environmental resources that they used to fuel their drive for academic success.

Keywords

Achievement Gap, Adolescent, Black Males, Academic Achievement, Phenomenology

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This qualitative inquiry examined the lived experiences of 14 high-achieving, eighth-grade, Black males in three inner city middle schools. Anchored in a social constructivist paradigm, this study focused on factors that influence the educational experiences of early adolescent Black males. Participant selection was based on state test scores, GPA, and SES; data were collected by classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Six themes and twenty-two subthemes related to factors which promote achievement and the meaning of achievement were found. Results show that high achieving students were motivated to excel, in part, by striving to counter negative assumptions about Black males. Participants faced many personal and contextual challenges, but they were able to identify individual and environmental resources that they used to fuel their drive for academic success. Keywords: Achievement Gap, Adolescent, Black Males, Academic Achievement, Phenomenology

The education of high-achieving Black students has received relatively little attention in educational literature (Ford, 2006; Henfield, Washington, & Byrd, 2014; Warren, Douglas, & Howard, 2016). Recent authors contend that understanding the experiences and success strategies of such students is critical in that it can counter prevailing narratives of academic deficits which has dominated education literature (Warren, et al., 2016; Wiggan, 2014; Wright, 2009). Further, it is important to note that the available research on the experiences of Black males who excel academically has been conducted primarily at the high school (Gayles, 2005; Graham & Anderson, 2008) or college level (Harper, 2012; Warren, 2016), but very limited regarding early adolescent Black Males (Nelson, 2016). Accordingly, the overarching purpose of this study is to add to paucity of research on Black males' academic excellence in middle school, despite a myriad of personal and contextual challenges faced by this group of students. This study gives voice to these students, who have largely been neglected by the academic community. As such, this study focuses on the behaviors, approaches, and environments that support young Black males' academic achievement. This study also focuses on experiences that increased their risks of academic failure and how these students are navigating those risks.

Black Males and Academic Achievement

Black adolescents disproportionately attend large urban schools where academic achievement and graduation rates are often lower than the national average (Bell, 2014; McGhee, 2013). Additionally, Black males are more likely to be held back as early as fourth grade and to experience the highest rates of expulsions (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Toldson, Fry-Brown, & Sutton, 2009; Warren, 2016), and stereotype threats (Steele, 1997). In short, Black males are generally believed to have limited opportunity for quality education as they

encounter numerous systemic factors that create educational opportunity gaps (Henfield et al., 2014; Nelson, 2016) that limit Black male academic achievement.

School and family environment, community, educational outlook, and teacher and peer relations strongly influence Black male achievement (Bennet, 2006; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Nelson, 2016). Consequently, understanding the lives and experiences of Black males is paramount in addressing negative school experiences and promoting practices that facilitate academic excellence (Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009; McGhee, 2013). Promoting excellence is central in middle school when social and educational demands increase (Chung, Elias, & Schnider, 1998) due to developmental changes and a new school environment.

Adolescent Development and Middle School Transition

Middle school poses a critical shift for early adolescents due to changes in school setting, educational roles, and peer and teacher interactions (Chung et al., 1998; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Ryan & Shim, 2012). Additionally, the physiological changes of puberty, as well as the social and cognitive changes of early adolescence modify how middle school students see themselves and their environment (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002), often resulting in academic decline (Kang McGill, Hughes, Alicea, & Way, 2012). Achievement patterns as well as the achievement gap between race and gender begins to take shape during early adolescence (Arlin Mickelson & Green, 2006). As a result, middle school is a crucial time to nurture academic gifts, address weaknesses, and put students on a trajectory of academic success.

Additionally, middle school transition is linked to challenges such as emotional problems, low achievement and self-esteem, and difficult peer relations (Chung et al., 1998; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013), which influence achievement in and beyond middle school. These challenges increase vulnerability, making this developmental stage a critical time to foster personal and academic growth (Akos & Ellis, 2008; Gutman et al., 2002; Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). In middle school, students change from a nurturing-oriented elementary school setting, to a performance-based setting that requires more independence and the ability to manage multiple tasks simultaneously (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). As they navigate these changes, adolescents begin to question their identities and abilities (Roderick, 2003) and learn from those around them who they are and who they want to become.

Using Social Cognitive Theory to Understand Participants' Experiences

Social cognitive theory (SCT) can be useful in understanding how students interact with environmental systems such as educational, family, and social structures to impact their behaviors (Bandura, 1989). According to SCT, humans engage in cognitive self-regulation that supersedes their environment and allow them to use their visions of the future to determine present behavior by assessing, constructing, and monitoring their actions to secure a desirable outcome (Bandura, 2006). SCT focuses on goal directed behaviors and proposes that the interaction of personal and contextual factors influence motivation and performance and ultimately determine human behavior (Burney, 2008). These reciprocal connections develop via self-regulatory influences such as self-efficacy, self-regulation, motivation, emotions, planning, and self-reflection. These cognitive processes are central to SCT as the theory emphasizes how individuals perceive others and their environment (Bandura, 1989; Burney, 2008).

Vicarious learning is the feature of SCT that includes how students learn by observing various models (Burney, 2008). These models include parents, mentors, peers, and highly qualified teachers who master and deliver their content in ways that challenge students to excel

(Ford, 2006; Haycock, 2001). Self-regulation, a key concept in SCT, is necessary for goal setting, task management, self-monitoring, and self-confidence (Burney, 2008; Schunk, 2005). Self-regulation reduces maladaptive strategies such as lack of attention and fruitless study habits. In middle school, students are more vulnerable to these limiting strategies, because of transition adjustments such as decreased self-esteem and task value (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Consequently, a rigorous, high-level curriculum will provide challenging tasks (Haycock, 2001) that strengthen self-regulatory skills and improve achievement. Black males need innovative, purposeful scholastic opportunities (Henfield et al., 2014) to challenge them to develop self-regulatory behaviors, self-confidence and feelings of efficacy towards academic pursuits. Academic self-efficacy, the belief that one can successfully complete academic tasks (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011) is influenced by environmental systems such as educational and family structures. As a self-regulatory influence, academic self-efficacy helps to provide the cognitive means that enables students make choices, reflect on their choices and encourage themselves (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011). Black males with strong levels of academic self-efficacy can engage in effective strategies needed for self-regulated learning (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). To the contrary, those who doubt their abilities become unmotivated, thus lowering their academic expectations (Bandura, 1989).

Black males are also impacted by the expectations of teachers, parents and society. Many educators expect very little from students in high poverty school districts as reflected in low-level assignments that do not adequately challenge students (Haycock, 2001). Black males will be more inclined to thrive in environments where their academic success is both expected and celebrated (Gordon et al., 2009; Nelson, 2016). In middle school, Black males must have access to a range of self-regulating strategies to deal with the new challenges and expectations they will encounter on the path to academic success (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). This will help Black males develop the confidence needed to master various tasks and progress through school effectively. As mentioned previously, several systemic, environmental and individual factors influence the pervasive achievement gap, therefore, it is useful to analyze differences in educational outcomes within the context of personal, social, and environmental factors (Ford & Moore III, 2013).

Research Questions

This research employs a strengths-based approach to examine the lived experiences and successful academic achievement from the perspectives of early adolescent Black males in low-income, urban, middle schools. Strengths-based approaches emphasizes participants' strengths and the strategies, environments, and experiences that create social supports and promote and celebrate student success (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Strengths-based approaches increase motivation and contribute to a climate that promote positive change and development (Cox, 2008). This approach is counter to much of the research on Black male academic achievement which is conducted from a deficit perspective that focuses on what Black males are unwilling or unable to do (Wiggan, 2014; Wright, 2009). The research questions are: What are the lived experiences of academic success for Black males from low income urban middle schools? What barriers and challenges are they navigating and how are they overcoming these challenges?

Participants

Participants were 14 eighth-grade Black males (ages 12-14) from three public middle schools in the northeast. Specifically, participants were selected based on: (1) academic average of 85% or higher, (2) score of Level 3 (performing at grade level) or Level 4

(performing above grade level) on the state English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics exams, (3) and eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. A score of 85% is equivalent to standard score Level 3. Test data were based on scores from the Common Core ELA and Mathematics exam administered in 2013. The state education department and the city's DOE predicted a significant drop in passing rates that year due to unfamiliarity of the exam (Rose, 2013). As a result, students who scored a high Level 2 (approaching grade level) on one of the two exams were included if they met all other selection criteria. Grades and test scores were verified electronically in the schools' data recording systems or via student report cards. A summary of participants' demographic profile is located in Table 1. Participants were informed verbally that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. This information was also included in both consent and assent forms. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were again reminded verbally, of the voluntary nature of their participation as well as the freedom to withdraw.

Table 1:

Demographic Profile Summary

Participant	Age	Test Scores		Background	Family Structure
		Math	ELA		
Devin	14	2	3	Non-immigrant parents	Guardianship
Ryan	14	3	3	Non-immigrant parents	Guardianship
Chris	12	3	3	Non-immigrant parents	Both parents
Mike	13	3	3	Non-immigrant parents	Both parents
Tim	12	3	3	Non-immigrant parents	Single parent
Kirk	13	4	4	Non-immigrant parents	Single parent
Troy	13	3	3	Immigrant parents	Both parents
Mitchell	13	3	3	Immigrant parents	Both parents
Phillip	14	4	3	Immigrant parents	Both parents
Allan	14	4	2	Immigrant parents	Both parents
Calvin	14	4	3	Immigrant parents	Single parent
Alvin	13	3	3	Immigrant parents	Both parents
Karl	14	3	3	Immigrant	Both parents
Matthew	14	4	3	Immigrant	Both parents

Pseudonyms were used for all participants, their respective schools, school districts, and communities to protect their identities.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Prior to the interview, participants completed a 5-minute demographic questionnaire that inquired about age, ethnicity, household composition, extra-curricular activities, test scores, GPA, and awards and honors.

Interview protocol. The semi-structured interview protocol was composed of open-ended questions and divided into four sections. Content for the protocol came from a combination of the literature (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010) as well as researchers' experience in education. The protocol inquired about childhood and middle school experiences that may have influenced participants' academic accomplishments, their views on academic achievement and the achievement gap. Interview questions also inquired about the interactions and experiences that participants believed supported their success, the meaning of academic

success in their lives as well as their expectations for the future. Sample questions include “Why do you believe you do so well in school?” “Who cares about your success outside of school?” “How do you spend your time?” (The complete interview protocol is presented in the Appendix.)

Participant Observation

The primary researcher observed participants for one class period of 45 minutes in an eighth-grade class room in the all-boys school. This was an advanced placement (AP) class which consisted of 25, predominantly Black males. The observation was conducted during the 8th period social studies class. The observation allowed the researcher to get a sense of the social interactions, peer and teacher relations, and classroom traits that influenced their learning. The teacher mostly played a facilitating role while students directed themselves throughout the lesson. Participants’ interactions conveyed self-awareness of learning styles and task-approach, high degrees of self-regulation, as well as goal directed behavior.

Bracketing Bias

Constructivist research includes describing and bracketing investigator bias throughout a study (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). The primary researcher is a Black, female, immigrant, inner city public middle school teacher for over 15 years. These characteristics place the primary researcher close to the participants’ experiences (Morrow, 2007). This researcher is also a parent of two sons who excelled academically in the face of harmful school experiences such as violence, teacher bias, low teacher expectations, stigma, and limited resources in the school district where the research was conducted. As a result, the primary researcher has direct knowledge of experiences that limits educational opportunities for high-achieving Black males and a keen interest in Black male academic achievement. The co-authors of this study specialize in multicultural research, qualitative research methods, education, and have published qualitative and quantitative research on topics such as academic achievement, motivation, self-regulation, early adolescent career development, and qualitative research methods.

Procedure

Data collection. Permission was obtained from the primary researcher’s, Institutional Review Board (IRBs) as well as the DOE. Following these approvals, the primary researcher contacted the principals of the respective schools and they assisted in identifying students who fit research criteria. The primary researcher met briefly with students who volunteered to participate and made telephone calls to their parents to give them an overview of the study. After making telephone contacts with parents, stamped consent, assent, and permission to audio tape forms were hand delivered to participants at their respective school and were collected the following week. Parents were encouraged to contact the primary researcher if they had additional questions. Once the signed forms were received, face-to-face interviews were scheduled. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary that they could withdraw from the study at any time, even though their parents had provided consent. Conducting and completing all interviews, verifying transcripts, and observing participants required three to five meetings and were concluded over a period of six months. All participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed twice. However, 12 chose to be interviewed once due to time constraints and two were interviewed twice. The full interviews ranged from 43 to 89 minutes.

Data analysis. Data analysis was conducted by first listening to interview recordings then transcriptions were completed verbatim using voice recognition software. The transcripts were read twice while listening to the tapes, first to ensure accuracy and clarify information with participants, if necessary, and second to analyze the data. The analysis focused on participants' academic and non-academic experiences that they believed influenced their academic performance, how they perceived those experiences and what the experiences meant to them (Moustakas, 1994).

In the first phase of the analysis, the primary researcher perused each transcript and highlighted sentences or quotations that reflected how participants perceived their academic achievement. This process of horizontalization provides a window into participants conscious experiences and enable researchers to understand participants experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) with academic achievement. In the next phase of the analysis, significant statements from the verbatim transcript were clustered into broad categories and themes were developed based on participants account of their experiences as well as the contexts that influenced their experiences. "Thick description" (Ponterotto, 2006) was used to describe participants' thoughts, feelings and educational experiences and the meanings they make of these experiences in participants own words. Second, third, and fourth authors reviewed the analysis process and conferred with the primary researcher throughout with the process.

Results

Six themes and 22 subthemes were extracted from the data and outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Subthemes

Themes	<i>Sub-Themes</i>
Theme 1	<i>Views on Black Male Education</i>
Theme 2	<i>Individual Factors that Influence Achievement</i> Self-regulation and self-regulated learning Internal motivation Competition as motivation Academic efficacy Academic resilience Adolescent development
Theme 3	<i>Contextual Factors: Family and Community</i> Family environment Parental socialization and involvement Identity development Community connections Mentors and models

Theme 4	<i>Contextual Factors: School Climate and Experiences</i>
	Middle school transition
	School environment and experiences
	Teacher relationships
	Peer relationships
	Other school experiences
Theme 5	<i>Potential Barriers</i>
	Media influence and stereotype
	Negative school experiences
	Economic difficulties
	Test anxiety
	Individual and family problems
	School-life balance
Theme 6	<i>Meaning of and Strategies for Success</i>

The themes were developed based on the clusters of meaningful statements that emerged from participants responses. The themes reflect students' perception of the factors that influence their achievement, participants' views on Black male education, the meanings participants made of their achievement and their suggestions for increasing Black males' academic achievement.

Theme 1: Participants' Views on Black Male Achievement

Participants voiced a variety of opinions on their perceptions of Black males' academic performance. Matthew stated, "I don't even know why the achievement gap exists." Kirk shared that, "The way young Black kids think, they see one thing, they are going to want to follow that...He added that, "If adults in their lives help them to build a sense of leadership, they will want to follow that too." Some participants shared that learning about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the rich history and legacy of so many prominent Blacks, had a "good impact" and left them feeling frustrated with reported Black male academic failure.

Chris countered the opinions of the previous participants by stating, "I think as young Black men, we are not the most productive with our time and sometimes we do not think things through all the way." Chris believed that, "Since not a lot of people believe in young Black men, some do not have enough motivation and they end up going the wrong way." Chris also noted that young Black men need to be "taught how to value education" when they are young. Kirk voiced, "It bothers me to see so many people are not doing well." Phillip expressed empathy towards those who were struggling when he stated, "Some of them play around too much and some just cannot get the material. Sometimes it's difficult." Overall, participants were appalled at the general views of Black male educational accomplishments. Allan simply voiced the feelings of all participants regarding Black male educational achievement when he stated, "We have to fix that."

Theme 2: Individual Factors that Influence Academic Achievement

Each participant described aspects of his personality and personal characteristics that he believed contributed to how well he did in school. This includes cognitive and behavioral strategies related to SCT (Burney, 2008) such as self-regulation, goal-setting, academic

efficacy and time management that enabled them to initiate and engage in various academic tasks.

Self-regulation and self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learners are proactive learners who integrate various self-regulatory practices with their internal beliefs to complete a task (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Goal-setting, a key component of self-regulation, is often the difference in how students approach academic tasks (Burney, 2008). All participants described various self-regulating strategies such as goal setting and time management that have contributed to their achievement. Chris discussed his goal of getting into a competitive high school by getting excellent grades and having a passion for learning. Alvin shared his need to set goals so that in college and high school, he is not “lagging behind.” Goal-setting was important for Mike because, he did not want to be “someone trying to figure out what to do with my life when I am 21.” Mike believed that individuals need to develop the habit of goal-setting early so that this practice becomes merged into their self-concept to be used later in life. By setting goals, participants were able to make purposeful choices and feel confident about their accomplishments, boost their self-esteem and feel academically competent (Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011).

Time management, another key aspect of SCT relates to how individuals spend their time and monitor their actions (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). Both Alvin and Phillip used unstructured time at school to complete homework, so that they could use time at home for non-academic activities. Mitchell managed his time “very well and created schedules.” Devin noted, “You need time management, so everything doesn’t get piled up.” Good time management reduced the possibility of becoming overwhelmed with assignments and helped to create school-life balance by including time for social activities.

Self-regulation involves becoming aware of your activities and monitoring your actions and effort (Burney, 2008; Schunk, 2005). Mitchell expressed, “I do have that imagination where I like to play around but I don’t bring that in the classroom.” Chris has trouble concentrating and he observed, “I start with a certain amount of focus and if that focus is not used for a certain purpose and by a certain time, it goes away.... Sometimes I cannot even move from one place.” Devin illustrated an aspect of behavioral regulation when he indicated, “When you get into trouble, you become even more aware of what you are doing, and you are even more determined not to make the same mistakes again.” With awareness, regulating behavior will influence academic outcomes as it allows students to appraise their performance and make any necessary adjustments (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

Most participants articulated various characteristics that set them apart as self-regulated learners. For example, Alvin opined, “You cannot just start from listening in class and doing your homework. You have to do extra.” Matthew described his experiences with a teacher who taught students to be responsible for their own learning. Matthew specified, “He taught us how to be students and to study on our own.” As a self-regulated learner, Mike affirmed, “I can’t be my best if I am not challenged.” When teachers provide students with a challenging curriculum, it enables them to feel in control of their learning (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Haycock, 2001). This autonomy is an important part of adolescent development (Akos & Ellis, 2008) and helps them become more confident in their abilities.

Motivation. Participants demonstrated a high level of motivation, another key component of SCT, which indicates that they absorbed the learning material and liked school (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In educational research, motivation is considered a principal element of achievement and often creates the difference between high and low achievers (Garn & Jolly, 2014; Maehr & Zusho, 2009). Although the sources of motivation were diverse, all participants described various actions that were directly linked to their level of motivation.

Alvin declared, "I strive for success... I don't just settle for anything." Like Alvin, Mitchell was motivated by self-based standards. Chris discussed his motivation by saying, "I feel like I have an obligation to myself. I don't know how to explain it, but I know that I can't let myself down."

Competition as motivation. Competition is sometimes viewed as a maladaptive personal trait that promotes aggression and conflicts, therefore competitiveness is often discouraged in academic settings in favor of collaboration (Hwan & Arbaugh, 2009; Shimotsu-Dariol, Manson, & Myers, 2012). Despite such assumptions, eight participants narrated that their educational achievement was being maintained in part, by their competitive nature. Tim observed that his classes were "very competitive" but he also acknowledged that, "It is good for us because we all strive to stay on top. We motivate each other." Allan said, "We see who would get a better grade....it is a friendly rivalry.... We tease each other. It is very motivating." Chris also used competition to maintain social ties between himself and two peers. He emphasized, "We are fine as long as nobody infiltrate our little place at the top.... You are not having our title. I take pride in that." Academic competition might be a useful in increasing motivation and performance among students with high trait competitiveness that could benefit from academic competition (Shimotsu-Dariol et al., 2012). Academic competitiveness also indicates confidence in one's ability to successfully compete with peers. Thus, these findings have implications for achievement goal theory, a motivational framework that focuses on why students achieve. Specifically, goal theory finds that under certain circumstances, goals focused on outperforming others (i.e., performance-approach goals) can be adaptive for learning, particularly among students who feel academically competent as it highlights students' ability to perform (Maehr & Zusho, 2009). Increased performance increases motivation and feelings of efficacy (Burney, 2008) towards achievement.

Academic efficacy. Academic efficacy, which refers to an individual's beliefs in his or her academic capabilities, is critical to academic achievement (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Alvin noted that his thoughts about his abilities were bolstered by the school demonstrating high expectations of him, by placing him in an Advanced Placement (AP) class. He stated, "I am encouraged that I'm in this class and I have to show why I am in this class and deserve to stay in this class. I'd rather be encouraged than intimidated. I welcome the challenge." Calvin described his academic ability as an "innate gift" but stressed that he needed to "take the time and make the effort to develop this gift." Matthew sees himself as "someone with a lot of potential, but he added, "I am young, so I will still make mistakes. I have potential, so I just have to train myself to achieve my goals." Tim believed that his intelligence helped him to develop all aspects of himself. He specified that, "My intelligence allows me to utilize the information that I have and take advantage of the things that I am exposed to." Students are strongly influenced by information they receive from their environment about their efficacy for educational tasks (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007) therefore, educators must create various openings for Black males to develop academic efficacy and build academic resilience.

Academic resilience. Academic resilience is the linking of behavioral and emotional adjustments amid risks such as poverty, stress, and ethnicity (Morales, 2008). Four participants conquered early challenges that could potentially hamper their educational progress. Ryan recounted a past where emotional dysregulation, aggression, behavior problems, and suspensions put him at risk for educational disengagement. He narrated a childhood filled with anger and pain and expressed, "My childhood was challenging. I don't know why, but I couldn't control my anger. When someone said something to me, I just flew into a rage and I would get into fights. I didn't have a relationship with any of my teachers in elementary school,

because they didn't like me. I didn't participate in anything and I didn't have friends." Kirk experienced poor impulse control and difficulty focusing during his early school years. He recounted that, "I had a hard time paying attention. I talked a lot and my teachers did not like that. Those attention issues were really difficult for me." Mike struggled with reading and reported that he "had to spend a lot of time practicing reading." Phillip went to three different elementary schools and found it stressful to constantly lose friends and readjust to a new environment. As a result, of instability, Phillip became interested in art because "it was something that I could do alone." He added, "I did not know when we would have to move so I was afraid to make friends." Although they experienced challenges, these participants persevered and are obtaining inspiring results. Academic resilience develops from a combination of personal and social factors such as school and community support and it is paramount in promoting positive youth development (Warren, 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2013).

Theme 3: Contextual Factors – Family and Community

Contextual factors refer to aspects of the individual's environment (Bennet, 2006) such as family, culture, school, and community that influence how students perform in school.

Family environment. Family environment and home life are critical ecological factors that impact adolescents' school experiences (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). Chris learned to read at a very young age because his family was "fun and structured at the same time." Both Chris and Alvin described a well-ordered home life, responsibility, and a routine that allowed them to predict the consequences of their actions and helped them gauge their behaviors. Karl stated that devices and allowance were taken if his grades declined. He further added, "On Sundays, we have family night ... the family gathers in the living room and watch a movie and we have dinner together." Like Karl, Mitchell discussed a loving, family environment that indirectly supported his learning. He specified that family activities gave him a "sense of belonging and feeling connected" knowing that he was with people who cared about him.

Parental socialization and involvement. Parental socialization refers to the messages parents use to nurture psychosocial adjustment, ethnic pride, and educational accomplishments in their children (Hill & Wang, 2015; Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013), to develop their ambitions and shape them for success. Chris specified, "My parents help me to value myself and my education." Mitchell's father helped him develop an internal focus to reduce his vulnerability to external influences. Parental socialization also includes racial and cultural statements that protect children against disparaging messages they may hear about their culture (Kang McGill et al., 2012). Matthew, an immigrant, attributed his excellence in mathematics and science to the love for these subjects engendered in his home country. Only two participants voiced culture specific socialization messages, but all participants shared various socialization messages from their parents about life and learning that have helped to shape their attitudes towards school.

Parental involvement and support are significant predictors of school success for Black students in two, single, and step-parent households (Clayton & Zusho, 2016; Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). Phillip stated, "My parents want me to do better than they have done." Calvin's mother always supported his educational needs and she tried to fill in any observed learning gaps. Tim remembered his mother's consistent involvement in his school life. Troy specified that when he performed less than expected, his parents would "help me figure out what I did wrong, why, and what I could do to improve." Parental socialization also helps to influence the identity children develop as they progress through adolescence (Hill & Wang, 2015).

Identity development. Participants demonstrated racial awareness, but none articulated a clear description of what ethnicity meant (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006) in his life. Matthew, an immigrant, was proud of his ethnicity and he discussed cultural values that continued to shape his life. For example, he had “lots of aunties and uncles” not related by blood who were authorized to discipline him and commanded the respect and attentiveness that he showed his parents. Karl harbored harmful feelings about his ethnicity due to damaging school experiences such as teasing and bullying because of his ethnic background. He voiced, “I have a problem with the way that Americans view immigrants as second-class citizens.... I feel ashamed of the fact that I am from another country.” When children are proud of their ethnic backgrounds, they are less likely to internalize negative messages about their ethnic group (French et al., 2006; Hudley & Irving, 2012; Rivas-Drake et al., 2015)

All participants refused to label themselves with negative societal identities and they took pride in both their academic and athletic identities. Alvin referred to himself as “an academic scholar” while Kirk noted, “School is just a part of who I am.” Academic identity is critical to academic attainment because it increases motivation and self-esteem (Matthews, 2014). Adolescents must integrate every aspect of their identities into a coherent sense of themselves that help to determine their experiences in and perceptions of school (Hudley & Irving, 2012).

Community connection. Contextual factors also include churches and other social entities that work together to influence developmental outcomes (Bennet, 2006). Church affiliation was particularly important to the two participants who had never met their fathers, because of the paternal relationships that they developed in church. Calvin revealed, “At church they are always asking me about how I am doing in school.” This made Calvin feel as if he mattered to his church community. Similarly, Devin’s church affiliation provided emotional support and guidance. Church attendance is a key predictor of academic achievement for African American students and those who have peers and family members with regular church attendance are also more likely to graduate high school (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). Troy felt comforted by what he learned at church and he quoted affirmations that helped him deal with stressors in school. According to Tim, feeding the homeless and other community services boosted his self-esteem and Alvin noted that his non-academic activities improved his feelings of self-worth and social development. Other participants confirmed that playing on community sports teams extended their circle of social support, built their skills and talents, improved their self-esteem and connected them to community members who were also role models. Community role models and mentors provide a significant form of association that has a strong influence on young Black men’s achievement (Gordon et al., 2009).

Mentors and models. Mentoring, a constructive relationship based on frequent interaction, guidance, trust, and collaboration with a non-parent adult is positively linked to academic performance for African American young men (Gordon et al., 2009). Models are individuals’ who others look to for guidance and direction. According to SCT, children learn from models in their environment and use their observations to acquire new skills (Bandura, 1989; Burney, 2008). Karl’s mother was his model and learning about her school experiences influenced his efforts and motivated him to excel. Ryan’s model was his aunt and he articulated, “It just makes me feel good knowing that I have someone who is a good influence sitting by me.” Allan was learning about wrong choices by observing the consequences to a family member who engaged in self-destructive behaviors. Chris believed that seeing the effects of negative choices might be more influential than having mentors advising young men on life choices. He specified that such observation “has a greater impact because it’s real life.... It is seared into your brain.” Culturally similar mentors expose Black males to others who care

about their experiences and well-being and help to safeguard them against underachievement (Gordon et al., 2009).

Theme 4: Contextual Factors – School Climate and Experience

School represents another important contextual factor that helps shape the academic performance of adolescents. Academic deterioration in middle school is often a result of poor fit between adolescents' changing needs and the school environment (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). This underscores the salience of attending to middle school students' experience of achievement.

Middle school transition. Middle school raises expectations and changes the school environment to meet the growing demands of adolescence (Akos & Ellis 2008; Ryan & Shim, 2012). Alvin, noted that skills he developed in elementary school helped him make the switch to middle school, successfully. Other participants struggled with the need to be popular and a desire to fit in with their peers. Devin had a poor reflection on his middle school transition and specified, "I wish there was something set up in sixth grade to help me with the transition.... I think that's one reason why I was somewhat lost in sixth grade and part of seventh." Karl also recalled challenges and stated, "In sixth grade I got into fights because that's when they started with the teasing and jokes." These negative experiences resulted in emotional turmoil, poor peer relations, and suspensions early in his middle school career. Peer victimization results in anxiety, depression, and lower achievement and passion for school (Rueger & Jenkins, 2014).

School environment and experiences. Black students thrive best in school environments where they feel respected, supported, and safe (Nelson, 2016; Toldson & Owens, 2010). All participants emphasized the need to feel valued, treated fairly, and have a sense of connection to the school community. Participants also desired interesting classes that were applicable "to real life." Phillip and Mitchell struggled in a passive classroom because they wanted to do more than "take notes and shut up." Ryan identified a seventh-grade teacher who, "definitely contributed" to his success. He noted that she "was nice and fun" therefore, he was able to develop a relationship with her which boosted his morale and helped him feel connected to school.

Teacher relations. Participants discussed relations with teachers that helped them feel like they were appreciated in school. All participants shared that they achieved more in classes where they had a good relationship with their teachers. Troy confirmed teachers' interests when they inquired about his welfare after an absence and Allan related to teachers who "helped and encouraged" him. Mitchell explained that when teachers shared their feelings about him, it made him feel "important and dependable." Positive student-teacher relationships affect achievement favorably for all students (Wang & Eccles, 2012) while a hostile environment increases Black male defensiveness and disrupt their performance (Gordon et al., 2009). Black males thrive academically in an environment where teacher show care for both their academic and personal lives and advocate for their well-being (Nelson, 2016).

Peer relations. Peers groups and peer relations can hinder or advance academic outcomes (Ryan & Shim, 2012). Alvin stressed the need to have friends with similar values "so you can help each other succeed." Chris expressed a similar view and shared, "My parents try to instill in me to have people around me with the same mindset." Tim added that friends who are interested in school would update him on homework when he was absent. Calvin opined that peers should "also have common interests so they can socialize outside of school."

Most participants valued having both high and low-achieving friends who were comfortable receiving help and supportive of participants' academic excellence. Phillip believed that, "When I do well, it encourages others to do well." Peer support increases adolescents' connectedness and help them feel more satisfied with school (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Other school experiences. Participants described various academic and non-academic activities that increased their connection to school, helped them develop leadership abilities, and improved their self-esteem. Tim was nominated school ambassador, and this boosted his self-confidence. Devin shared that when school administration gave him responsibilities and leadership roles he "started to feel dependable." Mike felt "really important" when teachers asked him favors. Alvin's most fulfilling school experience was non-academic because of the affirmative feelings the event engendered in him. Other participants evaluated themselves positively because of their athletic involvement and the chance to represent their school in extracurricular endeavors. Participants who engaged in peer tutoring also lauded its benefits. Allan, Alvin and Troy confirmed that their knowledge and self-esteem increased because of peer tutoring. When adolescents help each other in school, it promotes social bonding and increases motivation and achievement (Ryan & Shim, 2012).

Theme 5: Potential Barriers

Participants described several actual and potential barriers they were navigating as they moved through middle school. Barriers were both societal and personal. These include negative media and societal messages about Black males, negative school experiences, financial difficulties, family problems, test anxiety as well as a variety of personal barriers such as over confidence and perfectionism that could erode academic progress.

Media influence and stereotype. All participants were cognizant of the unfavorable expectations that society had for them as Black males. Consequently, each participant was able to recount his reaction to negative media messages regarding Black males and his feelings towards this phenomenon. Devin stated, "I know I live in a society where almost no one expects me to do well in school or care about my education." Ryan concurred, "They expect me to be good in sports...but bad in school." Troy noted that the media portrays young Black males "as thugs, gangsters, drug dealers...they don't always show the positive side of what we do." The reality of the one-sided negative depiction of Black males was the general feeling of all participants. Chris believed that some young Black males base their self-evaluations on these negative media images and he noted that, "We are only seeing as rappers, basketball players or some kind of sports figure. On TV, they never show us as doctors or lawyers or some other professional. "We are the rappers, the fighter, the hot-heads." Mitchell believed the media's excessive focus on Black males' athletic excellence conveyed the message that sports should be the main source of efficacy and passion for young Black men. He believed that consequently, many Black males are inclined to develop a stronger appetite for sports than for other skills or pursuing academics. Both Mitchell and Chris saw this approach as a challenge for young Black men because it limited their options. Kirk noted that "the general message from the media is that if you see a Black male, you don't see a successful person." Despite disparaging messages about themselves, each participant articulated that he used the negative images as "motivation" to excel and defy stereotypes about Black males' academic achievement. According to Tim, these messages provided the opportunity to "prove them wrong."

Negative school environment. Challenging school environment threatened participants' academic achievement, disrupted their learning or challenged their self-worth. Despite their stellar academic performances, participants were subject to negative experiences at school from both teachers and peers. Ryan recounted a disagreement with a teacher who called a question he asked "stupid." He reported that she punished him because he needed clarification and asked why she labeled his question "stupid." Ryan shared that he felt embarrassed and disrespected in front of his classmates. As a result, he became angry and ended up being suspended. Ryan described a teacher who went "out of her way to make me feel bad about myself." Alvin encountered a teacher who, "would be extremely loud and scream for no reason." Other participants shared instances when teachers embarrassed, belittled, singled out, showed favoritism, or were very punitive and heavy handed in discipline. According to Mitchell, the most challenging part of his school experience was trying to communicate with teachers who "did not wish to speak" to him. Troy was concerned about peers who sometimes disrupted the learning process and teachers who allowed the disorder to continue unchecked.

Economic difficulties. All participants received free or reduced-price lunches, indicative of economic challenges at home. Allan's mother recently lost her job and the decreased earnings was a stressor at home. Calvin's mother, a single parent, was also unemployed. Mitchell shared that he and his brother made up games to pass the time during the summer because his parents could not afford summer camp or electronic gadgets for their enjoyment. He viewed that setback as "a way for us to use our imagination." Chris experienced ridicule because his clothes and sneakers did not have popular labels. Chris responded by saying, "The grades are all I have.... I do not feel the need to fit in with those who have more money than me, or who don't want to fit in with me." Chris believed that current emphasis on academics will eventually allow him to achieve his desires and secure a brighter economic future.

Test anxiety. Test anxiety, an incapacitating cognitive response to the possibility of failing a test affects both emotional and physiological responses before and during a test (Brooks, Alshafei, & Taylor, 2015). As mentioned previously, expectations regarding state Common Core test in 2013 were dismal. Consequently, many participants shared that they were apprehensive about the test because of its newness and because of the predictions of negative results that permeated the media. Despite his anxiety, Troy was able to score on grade level for both the ELA and Math test. Devin revealed, "Everything that they said about the test really affected my confidence. I even thought about not taking it and my grandma said that I was "talking crazy." Phillip shared that although he usually does well on tests, he was "nervous for every test." Test anxiety reduces cognitive processing therefore anxious students do not perform to the best of their ability (Brooks et al., 2015).

Individual and family problems. Participants' challenges also included family problems that endangered their academic performance. Chris's brother has seizures that Chris specified, "really messed me up." Allan's brother is mentally ill and engages in self-injurious behaviors. Allan said, "Last year I did poorly in the first marking period because he was going through a rough time but as he got better, I got better." Two participants have never met their fathers and described the devastating effects on their lives. Participants also experienced personal challenges such as poor time management, academic procrastination, overconfidence, perfectionism, and self-imposed pressure that put their academic performance at risk.

School-life balance. Creating balance between academic pursuits and social life was a difficult prospect for some participants. Social development is a critical task for adolescents as

they struggle to learn more about themselves and develop peer relationships (Akos & Ellis, 2008; Matthews, 2014). Kirk described himself as “shy” and stated that he did not “like to make friends.” He felt that his “social life needs to be brought up a bit.” Chris’s challenging social life stemmed from financial difficulties and the inability of his parents to finance trips to the movies and other social activities with his peers. Some participants were mostly comfortable with the balance between their social and academic lives while others felt that they were hampered by limited opportunities for free expression at home and in school, and heightened self-consciousness that at times contributed to discomfort in some social settings. Most participants desired to have more chances for open dialogue with adults in their environment.

All participants were using their internal, community and school resources to mitigate risks (Williams & Portman, 2014), despite the personal and educational barriers they were experiencing. Harmful treatment of Black males can negatively influence how they perform in school because environments that are at odds with their developmental needs, also decrease their ability to engage in learning (Wright, 2009).

Theme 6: Meaning of and Strategies for Success

The final theme focused on the meaning participants made of their academic successes as well as how they believed young Black males who are struggling could improve in school. Phillip believed that creating a history of personal success would increase his individual prospects in the future and heighten the possibility of successes in multiple areas. Kirk orated that, “When you are learned, you become less likely to make bad choices and become involved in problems that will become bigger problems.” Matthew believed that his success was a measure of “how much he worked and his capacity for improvement.” Other participants declared that their academic success meant better individual futures, opportunities to pursue and achieve career and economic goals, as well as a chance to feel proud of themselves collectively and individually. Mitchell did not want to be “a part of the statistics that is failing.” Ryan was proudly defying the stereotype that Black males were incapable of both academic and athletic success. Like Ryan, Troy viewed success as the opportunity “to prove society wrong.” Similarly, Calvin believed that his success was countering negative labels about Black males. For Alvin and Tim, success meant they would be able to “give back to the community” and see themselves “as the ones who are going to change history.”

Participants articulated several strategies they believe will improve academic success among young Black males. Troy held that young Black men had to recognize when they needed to “separate themselves” from distractions in their environment. Kirk and Tim also emphasized the salience of self-awareness as a starting point for improvement, by identifying the factors that are limiting academic performance. Tim believed young Black males must take advantage of all resources in schools. Matthew suggested developing and academic focus rather than paying attention to negative media messages.

Calvin’s strategy for success was similar to Matthew’s, and he also believed that “you have to know when to ask for help.” High achieving Black males encounter many stressors but are the least likely to ask for help because of culturally embedded notions of masculinity (Henfield, 2012). Calvin proposed that students “meet the teacher half way ... and go the extra mile for yourself.” Karl added, “You have to be aware of your distractions and cut yourself off from them.” Chris believed that as young Black men, “We have to learn how to project and protect our image.” Chris added, “You have to let people know that you are there...know your value and act like you’re someone important, so others will treat you like you are important.” Chris opined that teachers would extend themselves more to “students with integrity” they developed from a history of reliability and trustworthiness in the classroom. He reasoned that young Black men could no longer leave it up to those in charge to do what is right for them to

excel in school. He believed that as young Black men, they have to “demand more” from educational stakeholder and others in the society who influence the lives of young Black males, because the record of academic failure has been persistent. Chris added that, young Black men must also “become visible for the right reasons” so they can be valued and respected in school and the community. He believed that they must assert their place in a society that constantly sends them the message that they are not “intelligent, capable, or competent” enough to contribute or function in our society.

Discussion

This study was conducted to assess individual and contextual factors that support positive academic achievement among early adolescent Black males and give voice to their experiences. There is a dearth of literature unique to the lived experiences of those Black males who do well academically (Wiggin, 2014). The results of this research show that this sample of early adolescent Black males who achieve highly, did so in an environment of support at home, in school, and in the community; this helped them develop a high set of internal standards. These standards include qualities such as monitoring, assessing, and adjusting behaviors to facilitate their academic success. These individual characteristics helped students develop self-regulatory skills which are paramount to academic achievement (Burney, 2008).

Social cognitive theory recommends the development of personal agency in planning, monitoring and guiding behaviors towards a desired outcome (Bandura, 1989; Burney, 2008). The detailed academic and life goals that participants articulated described the cognitive processes they engaged in and showed that they were proactive in their learning process. Participants described how they examined behaviors, constructed schedules, and developed learning strategies that suited their abilities and evaluated their progress. This self-governance is important in building students’ efficacious feelings and confidence in their abilities. They also noted various levels of enthusiasm and attentiveness that swayed their performance. Interest and utility positively influence students’ self-regulatory behaviors (Schunk, 2005), therefore students will be more inclined to engage in tasks that are personally meaningful and relevant to their lives. An implication of the results of this study is that young Black males need to have teachers and other stakeholders who are aware of their cultures and backgrounds and who are willing to give them the opportunity to make authentic connections by providing tasks that are valuable and personally meaningful to them.

In addition to task value, relationships with teachers also influenced how participants performed in school. It is vital that teachers develop affirming relationships with Black males since they learn best in supportive environments (Gordon et al., 2009; Nelson, 2016). Although all participants shared examples of positive relations with their teachers, most participants also recounted negative school experiences such as disrespect, lack of communication, belittling, intimidation, and perceived favoritism that limited their involvement or contributed to their disconnection from the educational process in individual classes. This indicates that even with strong personal characteristics, these participants are not immune to an unaccommodating school environment. As observers, the participants’ perceptions are influenced by the views and opinions of various models (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Consequently, when educators and other adults treat students with dignity and respect, students will be more inclined to demonstrate self-respect. As models, teachers have a powerful role in influencing the self-perception, emotional states and overall development of their students, hence their performance.

Models are also peers who participants learn from through observation. Participants articulated various ways how peers supported their learning. Some developed the confidence to persevere by watching their peers who were excelling at a higher level. Those who were peer

tutors reported that they learned more by teaching others, and they also reported increased self-esteem and confidence from engaging in peer-tutoring. None of the participants reported that they were ridiculed or ostracized because of their achievements. These participants' experience is in direct contrast to "acting White theory" which postulates that high achieving students experience harassment by students who were less academically inclined (Ogbu, 2004). These participants reported that their achievements were celebrated and encouraged by both high and lower achievers. According to SCT, both teachers and peers contribute to the social setting that influences learning through modeling (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Participants engaged in a variety of social relationship that impacted their lives in and out of school. Some participants shared that bonding with peers through sports or other community based, non-academic activities made it easier to build rapport and form supportive friendships that allowed them to become models and tutors for peers at academic risk.

All participants expressed concern for peers who were underperforming in school due, in part, to awareness of societal expectations imposed on them because they are Black males. The media persistently presents negative images of Black males that influence their views of themselves and their ability to successfully complete school (Howard, Flenbaugh, & Terry, 2012; Wiggan, 2014). These stereotypes can cause Black males to question their academic potential as well as their place in and ability to do well in school (Ford & Moore III, 2013; Winerman, 2011). Each participant realized the need to challenge negative social imagery that could affect all facets of their lives (Howard et al., 2012). All had personal strategies that he was actively using to rebel against these messages and carve out an academic path that could help him secure a bright future. Nevertheless, these images angered participants and they were unanimously of the mindset that succeeding academically meant that they can defy prevailing stereotypes and negative expectations. Stereotypic labels often make it difficult for stakeholders to see the strengths inherent in young Black males, causing them to focus on projected deficits (Whiting, 2009) that taint expectations. Additionally, in early adolescence, some of their abilities might not be evident due to their developmental stage; therefore, the adults have to help young Black males discover and nurture all their skills.

Participants were protected from a harsh external environment, primarily, because of supportive parents and other adults who guided, nurtured, and explained societal outlooks for young Black men and the expectations they should set for themselves. These research findings are consistent with prior research (Bennett, 2006; Clayton & Zusho, 2016; Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007; Hill & Wang, 2015; Toldson et al., 2009) that stressed the salience of parental involvement as a major influence on achievement. Participants reported relationships with parents and parental figures who took active roles in their academic, social, and emotional development. Many participants also described the role of their spiritual community in providing encouragement and social support especially for participants who had no relationship with their fathers.

By working proactively with successful Black males, school personnel can help young men incorporate academic excellence into their identities and increase opportunities for them to interact with peers who are struggling academically. These social encounters will potentially motivate peers experiencing academic difficulty and help them assess and adjust any academically defeating behaviors. Most participants were engaged in extracurricular activities with students at varying levels of academic performance. They reported that building relationships outside of the classroom, made it easier to assist those who needed academic help in class because of the bonds they are able to form outside of the classroom.

Results also showed that immigrant and non-immigrant children ascribed different meanings to academic success. Participants from non-immigrant families expressed more concern with defying stereotypes, embracing the historical legacy of greatness, advancing the collective, and changing societal images of Black males. Among immigrant participants,

academic success meant greater opportunity for personal growth, family and ethnic pride, as well as utilizing opportunities in the host country. Overall, participants focused more on cultivating and incorporating an academic identity into their self-concept. This boosts motivation and results in greater academic achievement (Matthews, 2014).

This research also confirms that school environment is crucial to Black male academic performance (Gordon et al., 2009; Toldson & Owens, 2010). Schools must provide both educational and social support mechanisms simultaneously, to improve Black males school experiences and learning outcomes (Warren, 2016). Although these participants are doing very well academically, their most memorable school experiences were non-academic. These non-academic engagements increased participants' attachment to the school community and ultimately their self-esteem and confidence. For students who are struggling academically, non-academic experiences could also help them connect to school. The persistence of the achievement gap suggests that traditional methods of impugning parents, teachers, and Black culture for academic failures (Wiggan, 2014) have not been effective in narrowing the gap.

Results of this research also adds to the ongoing debate (Murayama & Elliot, 2012) regarding the influence of competition on performance. Academic competition emerged as a huge internal motivator behind some participants' continued academic success. The influence of competition on achievement has been researched extensively with mixed results. Murayama's and Elliot's (2012) meta-analysis on trait, perceived environmental, and structural competitiveness found that competition has a positive influence on achievement when linked to performance approach goals but undermines performance when linked to performance avoidance goals. In addition, Senko, Hulleman, and Harackiewicz, (2011) suggest that thoughts of outperforming others could become intrusive and limit available attention for the task. To the contrary, Shimotsu-Dariol et al., (2012) posit that academic competition positively influences high achieving students' desire for personal growth and academic rewards, class participation and relationship with teachers. Despite some participants' competitive nature, those who favored academic competition were also able to work cooperatively when necessary, while those were less competitive viewed competition less favorably. These differences suggest that the role of competition as a motivating factor depends on individual traits.

We cannot close the achievement gap by leaving out the narratives of our best achievers. For real change in educational outcomes, educators and researchers must be on the forefront informing policy makers of what can and will work for students at academic risk. Listening to the voices of those who are excelling is a practical place to start. They are living the experience of rising out of the gap created in part by poverty, social class, disaffirming school experiences, personal and family challenges, low expectations, and societal obstacles. It seems most productive that we use their understandings to help create better educational outcomes. In addition, Black males need to be engaged in conversations about their education and the achievement gap, so they can see themselves in the solution and become insiders (Howard et al., 2012) in their education. Some participants were unaware of the pervasiveness of the achievement gap and were encouraged by their individual, academic position in relation to this occurrence. When social science researchers focus on the positive aspects of Black male education, we can help to combat the stereotypes and promote empowering and affirming expectations for Black males.

Implications for Practice

Counselors and educators cannot take for granted the risks exposures of participants based solely on who they are as young, academically gifted Black, males. Scholastic excellence of high achieving Black males does not reduce their vulnerability to environmental and psychological stressors. Therefore, counselors and other educational stakeholders must support

and monitor Black males' psychological as well as academic development. Focusing on their strengths will narrow the gaps in the literature related to the educational environments that support the academic development of early adolescent Black males. Schools must give them responsibilities and make them feel valued and connected to school and the community. In addition, it is crucial that educational contributors to adolescents' life have a sense of timing regarding academic and career benchmarks to help young people guide their future directions and assist with planning and preparation for college and careers. Middle school is an opportune time for adolescents to widen their career interests (Jackson, Potere, & Brobst, 2006), set goals for adulthood and begin to carve out a path for a positive future.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several limitations are inherent in this research. These participants were from one inner city school district in the northeast, therefore the results might have different implications for populations in rural and suburban areas. Another limitation is that only one group of participants was observed. This reduced the experience of deeper immersion into the setting (Morrow, 2005).

Considering these limitations, it is important for future studies to address gaps in the literature regarding many educational issues within the Black community. First, quantitative research would explore important findings such as within group differences in parental, racial, and academic socialization, and the role of competition in academic success. Future investigation into how greater exposure and experience of school influence aspects of identity and future orientation would also be useful. Levels of acculturation should also be explored to assess links between acculturation and achievement as well as how levels of acculturation influences socialization practices. Some participants mentioned the importance of spiritual practices to their academic achievement. A qualitative and quantitative inquiry into the relationship between spiritual development, spiritual practices, and achievement would be beneficial to inform educators and counselors of how spiritual resources, can be capitalized to improve the educational achievement and psychological development of Black males. Exploring gender differences in academic competitiveness would determine whether this construct could be useful for the academically gifted across all genders. Further study on academic achievement should also include a focus group and include samples of males and females to explore gender differences related to all aspects of achievement and assess similarities and difference in barriers and protective factors for males and females.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

The first set of questions relates to your early life experiences

- Where did you grow up?
- Do you still live with the same people? Tell me about them.
- What if anything has changed?
- What was life like for you as a child? What is your best/worst memory?
- Tell me about your earliest memories of school.

The next set of questions is related to your educational experiences as a middle school student?

- What has it been like for you in Junior High School?
- Who are the people who matter to you at school? Tell me why they matter to you.
- Who do you believe you are matter to at school? Why do you feel you matter to that person?
- Who will miss you when you graduate? Why will they miss you?
- Are there people in the school that you feel you can depend on? What does it mean to

you that you can depend on them?

- Did they ever make you feel like they depended on you? How was that meaningful to you?
- What happens when you are absent from school? What does it mean to you?
- What has been your best/worst experience in JHS?

The next set of questions is related to your academic achievement

- Why do you believe you do so well in school?
- What strategies do you use when studying to help you do well?
- Tell me about the people who help you to succeed.
- How you know that your success is important to them. What does that mean to you?
- Who cares about your success outside of school? How do they show that they care?
- What does it mean to you that they care?
- Do you believe school personnel (teachers, counselors etc) contributed to your success? How?
- Tell me about your most memorable learning experience in school? What made it memorable? What does the experience mean to you?
- Do you discuss problems with adults in school? Why/ why not?
- Tell me about any challenges/ barriers you see your success.
- What does it mean to you as a young black male that you do well academically?
- What does it mean to you that the achievement gap exists?
- How do you relate to your peers who are struggling? How do they relate to you?
- How do you think they could become more successful?

The next set of questions relates to your personal qualities that help you achieve.

- How would you describe yourself? What do you consider your best/ worst quality?
- Tell me how these qualities contribute to your academic success.
- What does your academic success mean to you?
- How do you spend your time?
- What is the most important thing in your life right now? What do you think is missing?
- What would you like your life to be like 10 years from now? How do you plan to get there?
- What do you do for fun? How do you balance school with other aspects of your life?

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